

MISHPATIM (EXODUS 21:1-24:18)

Your Ivory Tower Is Blocking My Driveway!

2002 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz

Judaism is, to my knowledge, the only religion that encourages study for its own sake. Every culture requires people to know what it's about. A country can't enforce its laws and support its way of life if it doesn't have law schools, medical schools, and police academies. But people don't dedicate their lives to pure, theoretical, study.

The Torah is different. Post-graduate yeshivas do not limit their enrollment to "divinity students" who plan to become rabbis. Torah study is more than a means to an end; it is an end in itself.

It was the marriage of the millennium. The Nation of Israel was about to make a commitment "for better or for worse..." at Mount Sinai. Moses wanted to give the people a sample of what to expect:

"He took the Book of the Covenant (Genesis, the beginning of Exodus, and several Mitzvahs) and read it to the people. They replied: 'Whatever G-d says, we will do and we will listen.' " (Exodus, 24:7)

Rabbi Eliezer Shach, of Blessed Memory, explained this verse as a desire to learn more. Not only do we commit ourselves to obey the Commandments that we have received. In addition, we want to hear more! We want more Commandments; we want to learn all that there is to know about Torah and G-dliness.

There is, however, a down side to purely theoretical study. When we overly involve ourselves in the sublime, we run the risk of ignoring the mundane. The Torah does not want us to become ivory tower elitists who ignore the "little people."

This week's Torah Reading seems to open in the middle of a sentence: *"...and these are the laws that you will set before them..."* (Ibid. 21:1)

Rashi explains that this verse is a continuation of the previous discussion. Last week's Reading concluded with a description of the miraculous Revelation at Mount Sinai and the rules pertaining to the Altar in the Temple.

The Torah immediately launches a discourse dedicated to torts and civil laws: don't steal; pay for things that you break; don't pervert justice.

Rashi explains that the proximity of "holy" laws to "secular" laws is to remind us that both types come from Sinai. There is no such thing as saying, "Religion is religion and business is business." If our secular lives don't interface with Torah values, we have missed the whole point.

There is no such thing as a religious person who is dishonest. How then, do we explain the occasional unfortunate situation of a religious person who is, in fact, dishonest?

It's really quite simple -- he's not religious.

Have a great Shabbos. Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

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